

CityWest Homes Comments on Westminster Housing Commission Note of 16 February

Lord Best's note of 16 February provides a number of useful conclusions drawn from a visit to the Lisson Green Estate some of which I felt it appropriate for CityWest Homes as the managing agent of the estate to comment on:

Section A1 – The Arms Length Management Organisation

1. Although having an ALMO alongside the Council could be seen to invite communication difficulties, I strongly suspect that the good communication necessary to resolve issues like Lisson Green commercial property management are no more challenging than they would be between departments within a large Council. CWH has what it believes to be a very strong relationship with the Council and that minimises any mixed messages between the Westminster housing team and the ALMO.
2. On a very specific point raised, the rates charged for the community halls are agreed locally by management committees or resident associations. There is a slightly odd set of circumstances at Lisson Green which will be resolved in the next week or two.
3. On the question of local vs central decision making, CWH last week completed the agreement of "local service improvement compacts" – agreements established locally with residents on priorities for the year alongside CityWest Homes and the local estate teams. These are then used by the local teams to measure their performance and provide part of the performance incentive to them. We expect these to be a major step forward in balancing the need to meet local requirements and to retain consistency of direction. I think this provides useful evidence of how with goodwill, as the report suggests, possible difficulties can be overcome.
4. The model of using housing management contractors for local service delivery is one inherited by the ALMO from Westminster when we were created. We took a decision to bring 3 of our villages back in house last year in order to provide some benchmark estates through which we can now objectively assess whether the benefits of outsourcing outweigh the disadvantages.
5. An obvious question is whether having an arms length organisation creates advantage. The possible disadvantages of an ALMO are
 - Seen as an extra layer
 - Possible communication and identity confusion with residents

The benefits we have brought are, we would argue:

- By virtue of being small, a better ability to innovate, change and adapt – a few current examples are:
 - Development of how best to use partnering contracts to really drive out benefits
 - Resident engagement techniques
 - Procurement and supply chain management innovation to reduce both short term and medium term costs

- Because of the arms length relationship with WCC, the ability to partner with other organisations in a way which WCC might find difficult
- Reduced distraction for the strategic housing function in the Council
- Ability to access funding not available to WCC

This is all achieved at the same time as a close partnership with WCC allowing excellent joint work on antisocial behaviour, youth provision, technical innovation (eg the wireless cameras at Lisson Green).

Section A2 – Local Management

We would agree with the comment on “pepper-potted” management of property on estates whether through infill or sub letting through RSLs. CWH has a clear ambition to use the strong local presence it has on estates to manage more of these properties – we see benefits in local community cohesion, CityWest costs and RSL costs. This forms an important part of this year’s plan and initial discussions with RSLs are promising.

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